

## FRIDA KAHLO MYTH: REVIVAL OF ZAPOTEC ETHNIC GROUP'S COSTUME WHILE CONVEYING A SOCIO-POLITICAL MESSAGE OF WOMEN SELF-EMPOWERMENT, CRAFT SUSTAINABILITY AND PATRIOTISM

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### ABSTRACT

*Clothes create meaning without words. Historical clothes can be copied, reconstructed, a source of inspiration, or re-appropriated by an individual, by brands, by social groups or by subcultures. Their re-appropriation creates new values, messages and gives another dimension to the cultural history of the given garment. Their new meaning is superimposed and mixed with the past one.*

*In this paper, we will see how Frida created a myth of herself and how she used the traditional Tihuana costume, worn by the Zapata women of Tehuantepec from the South East of Oaxaca as a tool of self-empowerment along with her political, nationalist, communist and feminist message.*

**KEYWORDS:** History of Costume, Clothing, Semiotic, Structuralism, Hermeneutic, Sign, Zapotec Ethnic Group, Mexican Costume

### INTRODUCTION

The garment covers, protects, adorns but well beyond its materiality, it speaks to us almost like a language. A language certainly without words but with its many references, its hints, its nods that only initiated who have the knowledge of this language and the context can fully understand. The clothing communication is social, political and cultural. In this temple of clothes, the historical and cultural costume occupies a special place. It is a concentrate of meanings, with numerous signified, containing a multitude of connotations when analysed according to diachronic and synchronic approaches. (De Saussure)

The historical dress is a continuous source of inspiration for fashion designers and the fashion industry. Walter Benjamin, a German philosopher will also define fashion: "Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago It is the tiger leap into the past" (quoted by Pasco 118). In other words, he believes that fashion is a remixing of the past. Another philosopher, Baudrillard, believes that the fashion system itself is based on aesthetic of renewal, or infinite recycling. The multiple revivals are linked with a "propensity to an eternal return of past forms. It is all impregnated with a sense of déjà vu" (Baudrillard108)

The costume is also present in historical movies and in theatre. The designer's mission here is to copy it faithfully. Essential to talk about an era, its function is to transport the spectator beyond time. It has the power to cross temporal boundaries. Thanks to the garment the viewer immerses himself and believes in the story. One could not imagine a period film without costume of the corresponding time.

Finally, the costume can be seen to be re-appropriated by individual or specific social groups, or subcultures with the intention to convey a message. It could be said that is a hermeneutic reclamation. This re-appropriation is like the interplay of the movement of the tradition and the movement of the wearer. Unconsciously, the wearer re-interprets the history and injects his own meaning. This is the process which will be analysed in this research supported mainly by a structuralist and semiotic approach. We will take the example of the painter, Frida Kahlo.

### Objective

In this paper, the focus is to analyse how the Fashion Icon, Frida Kahlo has used the Mexican traditional attire to create an identity conveying, patriotism, modernism and self-empowerment.

Frida Kahlo, in her Mexican attire with a feminist, self-empowered and nationalist message "Kahlo often crafted her appearance and public identity to reflect her cultural heritage and political beliefs" (Jiyun).

### METHODOLOGY

The costume will be looked at as a sign. According to Saussure, a sign is an arbitrary relation between the signifier (sound - image, the material piece of clothing) and the signified (the concepts attached to this piece of clothing). The sign is not a mere object but creates meaning. Semiotic has been applied to linguistic in order to explain cultural events which carry a meaning. Thus, a specific kind of clothing can relay a meaning related to status, social belonging, nationality, belief, taste, sophistication.

The concepts, through a synchronic analysis, also generated a meaning which is relationally opposed to something else. (cheap/expensive; hand-made/mass produced; natural /synthetic; western/indigenous.)

Saussure offered this crucial insight that is relevant here: that concepts have meaning because of relations, and the basic relationship is oppositional. "In language there are only differences," according to Saussure (De Saussure 120). Thus "rich" doesn't mean anything unless there is "poor" or "happy" unless there is "sad." "Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system" (De Saussure 117).

### FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS



Figure 1: Freda Kahlo.

Frida Kahlo was a Mexican surrealist painter known for her auto portraits, born in 1907 from the union of the Mexican Matilde Calderon, from Spanish and Native American (*mestiza*) descent from Oaxaca and Wilhelm Kahlo, German from Jewish Hungarian origin. It is essential to keep in mind this element for understanding that her identity has been an active search and a choice. Frida always claimed to be born on 1910, the year of the outbreak of the Mexican communist revolution, so that people could directly associate her with the modern Mexico. She had a rebellious anti conformist personality, proud of her Mexican culture, against Americanization and till today she is celebrated by the feminist movement

All her life has been a long physical suffering, started with the polio contracted at the age of five and worsened in 1925 by a bus accident which caused severe injuries to her body. She went through 32 surgical operations throughout her life. She died at 47 in 1954.

The clothing and the iconic look of Frida Kahlo

Very often Frida wore, in real life and in her paintings, the traditional attire of a Mexican ethnic group, the Zapoteco of Tihuna, in Oaxaca.



**Figure 2: Zapotec Costume.**

The tihuana is composed of 2 pieces: the blouse called HUIPIL traditional garment in Mexico and Central America and a long skirt. The 2 pieces, generally colourful, are heavily adorned. The huipil, loose fitting, has a short square chain stitch. The fabric could be cotton, satin, velvet, or a mix.

The Signifier is therefore the skirt and huipil, also the other elements linked with the costume adorn in the hair, flowers, shawl, jewellery.

The Signified, the concepts related to them are: indigenous Mexican culture, patriotism, nationalism. The loose-fitting character of the huipil doesn't signify sensuality but rather a freedom of movement and position and could suggest a gender statement. "its geometry adorns an absent, thus impenetrable, body, in an apparent refusal of West's brand of feminine seduction and the masculine gaze it implies." (Aragon523)

Tihuana dress held a privileged place in the iconography of Mexican identity because of its close association with the Zapotec women of Tehuantepec and their allegedly matriarchal community (Aragón534).

The costume is acting as a Sign and shows that who wears this belongs or supports this culture. The national clothing is a kind of fixed costume which refers constantly to the same. It is generally fixed in time and unchangeable. However, Frida Kahlo didn't wear it as it is. She was mixing it with other elements belonging with European culture and created a kind of fashion bricolage and her specific identity.



**Figure 3: Painting Alla Cuelga Mi Vestido o Nueva York (1933).**

Frida made this painting in 1933 while she was leaving in New York with her husband. It is called “there is hanging my dress in New York”. Her Mexican colourful Tehuana dress is hanging in the center of the painting and personifies also Frida in New York. All around the dress can be seen a vivid ironic critic of the capitalist American world. It shows the degeneration of the society and the destruction of the fundamental values. A synchronic analysis reveals the play of opposition between the beauty, the simplicity, the colours of the Mexican tradition and the chaos, pollution, degeneration of the American society.

In New York, Freda didn't stop to wear her traditional attire and despised Haute couture.

The writer Herrera reports that, in New York, Frida Kahlo preferred to wear traditional clothing instead to wear Haute couture clothing. With these long regional garments, she was always the center of attention and sometimes children were following her in the street trying to ridicule her, but she was never bothered. (Herrera)

We can suppose after reading her diary and biography, which Frida started to wear the traditional clothing in 1929, for various reasons:

- To support the Zapatista Mexican revolutionist a patriotic message
- To please her husband Diego Rivera who liked a lot the Tehuana.
- For fulfilling her search for identity, and showing her roots, influenced by her mother who was also from Oaxaca
- But also, this colourful voluminous costume self-empowered her. The Mexican garment accompanied by numerous and voluminous ornaments like bracelets, necklaces also give life to a body bruised by operations and pain and which is almost motionless. The garment here speaks for itself and conceals the imperfections and debilities of the physical body.

Frida played an important role also in reviving these traditional dresses, some of them were no longer made, and promoting the Mexican culture and its textile wealth, all over the world. However, she was not wearing the regional costume without a certain degree of transformation, and very often she was modifying it using for example Spanish Cotton fabric, or Chinese silk fabric with dragon motifs and giving it an indigenous look. There was in reality a mix of elements from Mexico, Asia and Europe. “Frida Kahlo stylized her Tihuana dress with the Mexican *rebozo*, a long rectangular fringed shawl, draped about her shoulders and a massive string of Aztec beads about her throat. Her hair was also frequently braided and beribboned in the Tihuana style.” (Jiyun)



**Figure 4: The 2 Frida (1939).**

“The 2 Fridays” is a painting she realized in 1939, just after her divorce with Rivera and shows again the play of dualities and ambivalence. “The 2 Fridas” are the 2 personalities of Frida: the Mexican with her traditional Tihuna dress and holding a medal of her husband in her hands on the right side and on the left side, in white the western Frida with a Victorian/ Edwardian dress of the beginning of the century. She is holding a scissor which cut the relation with her husband and her heart is bleeding symbolizing all the pain of her divorce. “The 2 Fridas”, represents the duality of her personality, but also the fact that one Frida empowers and takes care of the other one, by holding the hand of each other. The synchronic reading shows also the Mexican Frida as more compassionate while the western Frida is more violent at the risk of her own life.

For Frida, the Tihuana became a sort of ideal and instrument for searching for its origins, roots and identity. However, we must also acknowledge that the Tihuana was not her only costume. All her life, she struggled in the research of an identity which is in reality dual and multicultural as her birth. We can see also Frida, wearing male clothing and short hair at some periods of her life. But this western Frida seems sadder.



Figure 5: Autoritratto (1940).

This is a painting of 1940, also done after her separation with Rivera. It is called *Autoritratto con Pelo corto* (with short hair). Here, she wears an oversized western male dark outfit with an androgynous look. She cut her hair, which lies on the floor, still holding the scissor in her hands, removed her traditional costumes and left behind all the things cherished by her husband such as the Tihuna and her hair that Rivera adored. Gonzales Castillo explains “With this act it seems that Frida is not only breaking with Diego, but with the attitude expected of the woman during this period. She wanted to be self-sufficient and independent and considered that through this Act of defiance was getting it.” (Gonzales Castillo 53)

Her clothing and her look were therapeutic for her, like some kind of catharsis.

The signifier here is the western male outfit. The signified can be the western values, values of independence, self-sufficient, masculine personality. And a synchronic global analysis of the hair and the costume reveals again the struggle of Frida between the freedom and the love, the western and the Mexican, the attachment to the past memories and the present.

Table 1: Synchronic Perspective

Synchronic View	Mexico		US/ West
signifiers	Mexican Tihuna		Western clothing
	Colourful	Colours	Dark colour, or subdued colours
	Organic flowers	Prints and decoration	Lines, stripes
	Mexican tradition		Western world
	Hand made	Fabrication	Mass produced
signified	Natural		Artificial
	Compassionate	Mood, mental state	Violent
	Bound, love		Freedom
	Patriotic		Westerner
	Feminine traits	Gender	Masculine traits
	Anti-colonialist, nationalist	Colonization	Colonizer
	The “other” “exotic	Culture	Dominant culture



**Table 2: Diachronic Perspectives**

Diachronic Perspective		
1925	Bus accident, had to stay in bed for months, pain and suffering	Apparition of the orthopaedic corsets made of leather, steel, and plaster for trying to rebuild her spine
Till 1929	Frida was communist activist, patriotic	Frida was wearing very often masculine clothes
1929-1939	Frida married Diego. Frida love story with Diego Rivera, travelling to New York as Proud Mexican. The relation starts to go through up and down. Her husband cheats on her with her little sister	Frida was carrying the Tihuana very often even outside Mexico
1940	Frida divorced Diego Rivera	As catharsis, Frida cut her hair and put western clothes
End 1940 onwards	Diego and Frida married again, but Frida concentrating more on her work, always affirming her independence, and without prejudice	Became again more feminine. Most of the self-portraits display her with the Tihuana attire. Also, most of the photographer will shoot her in her traditional costume. She became a fashion icon.
These: 2 readings give us different information and complement each other.		

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, Frida Kahlo has created her own icon. In majority of her paintings, she represents herself with recurrent elements of Mexican clothing, roses decorating her head, unibrow, moustache. All these elements, which are the signifiers, act as metonymy. A figurative reading of her look, based on the approach of the semiologist and sociologist Jean Marie Floch, needs also to insert them in their context of the early 20th century as well as in the history of Mexico and in her personal history.

It shows a play of opposition between the 2 cultures very often represented through clothing, and it shows also her own preference by the use of the colours, her expression, and the other symbolizing elements in her painting. The western clothing is less colourful, kind of boring and with no flowers.

But her auto-representation reads also as an opposition with the woman object. Frida in her painting is a subject, pure presence with a strong feminist connotation. She doesn't represent herself as a perfect woman. Her attitude, her position, the direction of her eyes, her imperfection like the moustache, facial hair, unibrow, her critic of the world reveals an existence in motion full of questions, contradictions and ambivalence.

With Frida we have just seen how the garment acts as a metonymy and means a whole. This garment is an active element recurrent in most of her paintings to signify the choice of her identity, because it is indeed a choice and not an identity imposed. It is also a choice in time and not a fixed choice. She is going back and forward in search of other aspects of her identity. It is an identity of woman, activist, feminist and nationalist.

We read in her works much more than just her Mexican identity but her desire to exist as a woman and minority culture against the patriarchy and dominant culture of the time that valued only the American dream.

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